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Scientific Speculators: IMSA as Training Ground for Science Fiction Readers

Science fiction (SF) is one of the world's fastest-growing literary genres. Created as a separation from traditional writing styles, it challenges its followers to question the framework of societies across the globe. One would think that such a genre would allow people of all different ages, shapes, and sizes to enjoy its distinctive novels, but this is not the case. Readers of SF must be inquisitive, opinionated, and confident; in other words, be extremely similar to a student at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy.

IMSA's belief statements and learning standards perfectly align with editor David Hartwell's description of an ideal science fiction reader, illustrating that perhaps there is a link between this academy, the students therein, and the literary genre of science fiction.

David Hartwell, an editor of science fiction and fantasy literature, has an interesting perception of science fiction readers. To Hartwell, "...the real golden age of science fiction is twelve," (Hartwell 269) showing that he believed the optimal time to read science fiction to be around adolescent age. The increase in independence of teenagers and young adults causes them to occasionally view the world with a sort of impatient and dissatisfied attitude; this perfectly correlates with SF because, with the distorted environments it thrusts its readers into, this genre promotes a mindset of healthy suspicion (Hartwell 272). Because they have not been on the planet long enough to have an unchangeable perception of society, it is easy for these readers to accept an alternate world to the one they live in, along with using that setting as a basis to question even the most basic assumptions about human nature (Hartwell 281).

Additionally, due to the huge doses of science fiction and fantasy given to children in American societies through comics, movies, and stories, alternate realities seem much preferable to our own (Hartwell 273). It is especially easy for teenagers to relate to the different realities given to them in SF books, since their fantasy-filled childhood is not long behind them.

Hartwell mentions another intriguing insight into a typical SF reader. He says that the SF reader, "...tends to solve problems at work with science-fictional solutions or by using the creative methodology learned through reading SF," (Hartwell 281). It is because of this fact that SF readers are careful, innovative problem solvers. They often think about the affect of present-day decisions on their future, using their analytical mind to come up with creative solutions to current problems. Hartwell also states that SF readers often make fantastic scientists (Hartwell 273), since SF increases one's wonder and fascination with science and how things work.

One place where students passionate about science go to be intellectually challenged is the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. This school is an institution that attracts the best and the brightest students from all across Illinois. To uphold IMSA's focus on, "...igniting and nurturing creative, ethical, scientific minds that advance the human condition..." ("IMSA's Mission and Beliefs"), school admission counselors seek to enroll eager 8th and 9th graders genuinely interested in increasing their knowledge and taking action upon their concerns with the current world.

IMSA students are creative thinkers, hard workers, and inquisitive learners. From personal experience, I have found that these adolescents think about the repercussions of their actions on the future and try to come up with ways to improve both their lives and

those of others. Following the IMSA belief statements, students, “[c]onstruct questions which further understanding, forge connections, and deepen meaning (“Learning Standards SSLs”). Additionally, students at the Academy, “...identify unexamined, cultural, historical, and personal assumptions and misconceptions that impede and skew inquiry,” (“Learning Standards SSL’s”). These guidelines portray IMSA students as incredibly intelligent and able to really examine the way society began, functions, and grows.

IMSA students nearly perfectly fit the mold Hartwell creates for the ideal science fiction reader. Based off of IMSA’s beliefs and standards of significant learning, along with Hartwell’s specific description of SF lovers, IMSA seems to both attract and create learners with the SF mentality of dissatisfaction with the current world and the desire to make a positive change. Science fiction and IMSA both have the same foundation of challenging the mind, along with drawing adolescents with highly analytical minds. There is, however, a small difference between IMSA and SF. Hartwell writes that the SF reader, “...tends to be a loner,” (Hartwell 281) while the IMSA framework is built to foster community and develop effective collaboration. However this difference is quite minor and can be easily disregarded when compared to the plethora of similarities between these two groups.

Science fiction and IMSA have much to learn from each other to become equally successful in their endeavors. There is much for each to garner from the other to create an ideal learning framework. Science fiction brings to the table a sense of inquiry and a skeptical outlook on human societies. Writers and editors of SF would encourage IMSA students to never accept things at a face value; to them, asking questions is a necessity to

improvement. There are limitless opportunities for positive change in the world, and SF encourages the crucial mindset to take them. On the other hand, IMSA has much to show SF about community and collaboration. If given the opportunity, IMSA students would push for science fiction readers to work with others to create the change they so desire. SF seems to portray an individualistic attitude, discouraging optimal leadership and ignoring the value of community. One can work with others and still be a leader; it is important that science fiction readers know and understand this fact.

At first glance, it seems strange that a school with heavy emphasis on the academic fields of mathematics and science can both attract and create students with a passion for the literary genre of science fiction. However, IMSA has made this statement possible, with its passion for inquiry into the habitual and the unknown. David Hartwell and the IMSA administration have strikingly similar declarations about their followers and together create an excellent duo. Due to the personality traits of IMSA students and SF fans, it is clear that IMSA is both a home for and a producer of SF lovers under the façade of brilliant scientists, whimsical mathematicians, and remarkable writers.

Works Cited:

Hartwell, David. "The Golden Age of Science Fiction is Twelve." *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*. 'Ed'. Gunn, James and Matthew Candelaria. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005.

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